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ABSTRACT

It is the school board alone that determines the quality of education provided within the school district. Without periodically examining its own performance, the board's capability to create a quality educational environment can be compromised. Evaluation is a control mechanism that allows the school board to make judgments about performance based on a set of predetermined and understood objectives. The function of school board self-evaluation is to improve the performance of others within the school district by improving the performance of the board itself. Eight reasons for self-evaluation of school boards are described and cited, based on the work of Kowalski (1981). They are to identify and clarify the board's purpose, to identify strengths and weaknesses, to assess successes and failures, to inform the public, to promote the concept of accountability, to avoid the abuse of power, to enhance the understanding of the purpose of evaluation, and to provide the framework for goalsetting. Further details are concerned with who evaluates school boards, the benefits and pitfalls of self-evaluation, appropriate criteria, and effective procedures. Two sets of guidelines are listed for school board self-evaluation. A discussion on individual board member and meeting evaluations concludes this paper. (RR)

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SCHOOL BOARD SELF-EVALUATION: CHARTING A PATH TO THE FUTURE

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SCHOOL BOARD SELF-EVALUATION: CHARTING A PATH TO THE FUTURE

Systematic evaluation fulfills two purposes. It permits those in charge of an organization to hold others accountable for their responsibilities within the organization and it is a tool which can be used to improve overall job performance. Teachers are evaluated on their ability to instruct the students under their charge. Administrators are evaluated on their ability to manage the daily operation of the school district. But local school boards, who are responsible for overall governance and policy development for the total school organization, often fail to evaluate their own performance. This is unfortunate, because it is the school board alone who determines the quality of education provided within the school district. Without periodically examining its own performance, the board's capability to create a quality educational environment can be compromised.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the issues surrounding school board self-evaluation: How many school boards perform some type of self-evaluation? Why should boards evaluate their own performance? Who evaluates school boards? What are the benefits and difficulties associated with school board self-evaluation? What are the criteria for evaluating school boards? What are some appropriate self-evaluation procedures? Finally, what about specialized types of self-evaluation, such as for individual board members or specific board meetings?

Definitions. What exactly does "evaluation" mean? Dale Bolton (1980) defines evaluation this way:

> Evaluation has to do with making judgments regarding a set of events, behaviors or results of behaviors in light of predetermined and well understood objectives.... Evaluation is a control mechanism that allows one to correct [behavior] and plan changes.

Evaluation is first of all a control mechanism which allows the school board to make judgments about performance based on a set of predetermined and well understood objectives. Evaluation also serves another function. Wynn and Guerrieri (1978) make the point that:

> Only through careful, honest, open appraisal can a board hope to improve its performance and that of its superintendent. The board must recognize that the school system can be no better than the board. The best superintendent can go no farther that the limitations the board will allow. Board members must work to remove their Limitations and strengthen their effectiveness if schools are to improve.

The second function of school board self-evaluation, then, is to improve the performance of others within the school district by improving the performance of the board itself.

School board self-evaluation does not occur in isolation. Rather, good self-evaluation is part of a cycle which begins with goals setting, and then proceeds to implementing the goals, to judging the results of that

implementation and concludes with a new set of board goals. A simplified self-evaluation cycle for the school board might be represented this way:

- Set goals by determining:
  what is to be done?
  when is it to be done?
  who will do it?
  how will we know it has been done?

- Implement the goals by:
  delegating
  monitoring performance
  adjusting as needed

- Judge the results by asking:
  what happened?
  why did it happen?
  why didn't it happen?

- Set new goals for the next cycle

The school board self-evaluation process occurs at the third step of the cycle, only after the board has set and implemented its goals. Evaluation is also the preliminary activity to setting new goals and thereby beginning the cycle again.

What does the research tell us about the frequency of school board evaluation? In 1989, Educational Research Service collected data on the frequency of school board self-evaluation. They discovered that:

- 51.5% of school boards never evaluate themselves at all

- 21% of school boards evaluate themselves infrequently, on no set schedule

- 26.4% of school boards engage in regular self-evaluation, normally on an annual basis

- school boards regularly evaluate their own performance in significantly fewer very small school district than in either small school districts, medium sized school districts or large school districts

- 66.9% of school boards in very small school districts never evaluate their own performance, a higher percentage than for any other enrollment category

Why should school boards evaluate their own performance? One of the major objections to school board evaluation is that school boards are elected public officials responsible to the public and not to any higher authority within the district. Board members are not employees in the same sense that teachers and administrators are employees. But there are valid reasons for the school board to evaluate its own performance:

- School boards should be evaluated for the same reasons that others

in the district are evaluated---to improve performance.

•School boards should recognize that the school system can be no better than the board. In order for schools to improve, school boards must overcome their limits and maximize their strengths. Evaluation is the tool which enables boards to do this.

Theodore Kowalski (1981) identifies eight other reasons for a school board to evaluate its own performance:

•**To identify and clarify the board's purpose.** The primary benefit of board self-evaluation is that the evaluation process forces the board to identify goals and procedures clearly. Evaluation demands that the board constantly reassess its progress in light of its purposes. Formal evaluation requires boards to establish written achievement statements, which is itself a benefit beyond the evaluation process.

•**To identify strengths and weaknesses.** Identifying strengths and weaknesses is critical for the board in planning, in selecting methods of operation and in making self-improvements. By using objective data, the board can determine its strengths and weaknesses without bias and without assailing individual feelings.

•**To assess successes and failures**. A well structured self-evaluation system makes it easy to identify successes and failures. Evaluation also provides a tool for increasing the probability of success.

•**To inform the public.** A basic responsibility of the school board is to communicate effectively with the public. Sharing the results of formal evaluation procedures can serve this purpose. It also provides a way of dealing with misinformation, rumors and misunderstandings. A good evaluation system can help eliminate faulty perceptions of the board and reinforce a positive image of the board.

•**To promote the concept of accountability.** What better example can a school board set for its staff than to adopt a formal evaluation system for itself? Teachers and administrators are held accountable and, since virtually all school boards accept the concept of accountability, what better place to start than at the top.

•**To avoid abuse of power**. A formal evaluation system serves as a reminder that at some point in time, board members and the board as a whole, will be held accountable to the public for its actions. The evaluation system should clearly identify the authority of the board and of individual board members. No single board member or faction of the board should be permitted to abuse the board's authority.

•**To enhance the understanding of the purpose of evaluation**. The board reviews either directly or indirectly the evaluation of each of its employees. Undergoing evaluation itself can provide board members with keener perceptions of what evaluation is all about. This understanding can be valuable during employee evaluations.

•**To provide a framework for goal setting.** A well conceived and well conducted self-evaluation process will provide the board with a wealth of information with which to develop goals for the future. Strengths can be enhanced and weaknesses corrected, but only if the board has identified them objectively.

Who evaluates school boards? Many school board members feel that election or reelection to the board is a sufficient evaluation. But elections are primarily political events that fail to take account of other important indicators of effectiveness such as working well with peers, sound decision making and thorough preparation for each meeting. Robinson and Bickers (1990) make the following points about who typically evaluates school boards:

- The literature agrees that self-evaluation by the school board is the most obvious and likely form of board evaluation. Except for the superintendent, other potential evaluators lack the necessary working contact with the board to make an informed judgment.

- In current practice, board evaluation is treated primarily as the concern of the board and the superintendent.

Robinson and Bickers (1990) also maintain that there are advantages to including other administrators, teachers and even representatives of the public in the board self-valuation process:

- Outside viewpoints can clarify discrepancies between the school board's own perception of its effectiveness and the perceptions of staff an the general community.

- Outside participation can encourage the academic community and the general public to arrive at a common set of expectations for the school board.

- Outside evaluators might be able to provide valuable insight into board procedures and ethics.

What are the benefits and the pitfalls of school board self-evaluation? Since most school board assessment is accomplished through self-evaluation, the benefits received and the difficulties to be encountered deserve careful consideration. Robinson and Bickers (1990) identify the following as important benefits of school board self-evaluation:

- The most important benefits of school board self-evaluation are enhanced credibility of the board, improved performance, improved goal setting and access to better information.

- Regular self-evaluation can benefit the board-superintendent relationship. Evaluation can help to distinguish the board's role from that of the superintendent and facilitate communication.

- To achieve constructive results, self-evaluators must be honest about their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as open to change.

McElheny (1980) warns school board members that there also some pitfalls to self-evaluation. These can be summarized as:

- When setting goals, don't confuse effectiveness (producing desirable outcomes) with efficiency (devising a better process).

- Don't take for granted that you know your community; monitor changes in the local population, economy, etc.

- Don't deal yourself out of the responsibility for achieving specific goals. The board should not just set goals for others to achieve, but should actively pursue as many goals as possible itself

Perhaps the most appropriate areas for board goal setting are governance activities, the role of the board as ambassadors of the instructional program of the district and its role as advocate for all learners in the school district.

To get the most from self-evaluation, board members must be honest about their strengths and weaknesses and open to change. Nemir (1991) lists some of the attitudes needed for successful self-evaluation:

- A willingness to communicate openly and honestly with one another

- An attitude which sees change as a positive step forward rather than as a threat

- A willingness on the part of board members to increase their knowledge and understanding of school district operations

- A committment of sufficient time to conduct self-evaluation properly

- Persistence--not all board members may not immediately agree that self-evaluation is desirable

- Patience--change does not come at once, but takes time and effort

- An orientation toward the future

- A willingness to collaborate in reaching goals

- The courage to change and to take on difficult tasks

- Honesty--both about the capabilities of individual board members and about the capabilities of the board as a whole

What are some appropriate criteria for evaluating school boards? An ERS survey of school board self-evaluation practices (Robinson and Bickers, 1990) discovered that in 59% of the school districts where boards are evaluated, the criteria for evaluation were determined jointly by the board and the superintendent. School boards established criteria alone in 24% of the districts. In the remaining districts where boards evaluated their own performance, criteria were established by the state or other outside agencies. School board self-evaluation should focus primarily on the performance of the board as a whole, since the board's effectiveness depends on its ability to function as a corporate body. Suggested criteria for school board self-evaluation include the following. The successful school

board:

- •Conducts meetings as scheduled, following the agenda and at a time and place convenient to the community.
- •Marshalls sufficient resources to ensure the best possible educational system, keeps abreast of student academic progress and periodically reviews the curriculum.
- •Establishes both short and long range goals relating to academic progress, faculty and staff procurement and physical plant needs.
- •Maintains a cooperative and constructive relationship with the Superintendent.
- •Exercises responsibility for sound personnel policies, including adequate staff compensation plans, an effective professional growth and development evaluation system and fair employment and dismissal policies.
- •Maintains a good relationship with the public by encouraging attendance at board meetings and releasing all pertinent information through an authorized spokesperson.
- •Ensures a thorough accounting of all revenues and expenditures and makes sure that all district property is adequately insured.
- •Systematically provides for the orientation of new board members and for the continued development of incumbent board members.
- •Exercises responsibility for the security of the schools and other district owned facilities and ensures that energy conservation steps are taken where feasible.

The Texas Association of School Boards Model Policy "Board Self-Evaluation" recommends that boards conduct an annual review of the following activities:

- Board procedures
- Board member training
- Conflict resolution
- Working relations with the Superintendent
- Conduct of Board meetings
- Long-range planning and goal setting
- Relationship with the community

What are effective board self-evaluation procedures? For school board self-evaluation to be effective it should be an annual event, scheduled in advance

and for a specific time. The National School Board's Association and the American Association of School Administrators (1990) recommend the following guidelines for school board self-evaluation:

•Any evaluation process should be constructive in that it assumes that any group of individuals is capable of improvement if evaluation is carried out systematically, with good planning, conscientious follow through and careful assessment of results.

•Board members should develop the standards against which they will evaluate themselves.

•The board should recognize the difference between school district goals and goals that the board sets for its own performance.

•A form for the evaluation should be designed and it should contain places to indicate not only strengths and weaknesses, but also to write in suggestions about how to improve.

•The board should not limit itself to those items that appear on the evaluation form. Both formal and informal comments have value and should be considered.

•Formal evaluation should take place at least once a year and at a scheduled time and place.

•A composite picture of board strengths and weaknesses is most accurate. Individual board members should complete the evaluation form independently of other board members and then the whole board should meet to discuss the results.

•When results have been tabulated, the board should develop the objectives it will seek to accomplish before the next evaluation cycle begins.

•The board should be evaluated as a whole, not as individuals.

•The board should provide itself with appropriate in-service education to ensure that it meets its own objective.

•In evaluating itself, the board should adhere to mandates of open meeting laws to ensure that self-evaluation conducted in executive session does not violate any law or policy.

Writing for the Texas Association of School Boards, Nemir (1991) recommends the following steps for board self-evaluation:

•**Decide on the goals of the self-evaluation.** The board as a whole should actively discuss the purpose of self-evaluation. Even though the benefits of self-evalaution may be clear, unless the purpose is clearly defined for all board members, the process can be confusing, potentially devisive and counterproductive.

•**Decide what aspects of the board's operation to evaluate.** Most often, the board will want to evaluate all aspects of board operations. Occasionally, however, the board may want to focus on some single aspect of its activities for review. The performance

goals behind self-evaluation will help the board decide what to review.

•**Select and adopt an evaluation instrument.** To be useful an instrument should concentrate on the areas the board has chosen to Evaluate and it should provide the kind of information desired. There are several instruments available (attached) that can be adapted for use in a particular situation.

•**Set a calendar for completing the process.** The board should decide in advance when the evaluation cycle will begin, who will complete the evalaution forms, how the data will be tabulated and by whom, and when the board will meet to discuss the results. Responses on the evaluation instrument should always remain anonymous.

•**Hold a meeting of the board to discuss the appraisal findings.** The outcome of this meeting should be a new set of board performance objectives for the next evaluation period.

The result of the self-evaluation cycle should be a set of performance goals for improvement in the board's operation. In most cases, no more than five or six goals ought to be established and they should be based in the information developed during the self-evaluation process. Goals should be reached through a consensus among all board members and an action plan should accompany each goal. The board might also want to conduct a periodic review of the goals it has set for itself at three and six month intervals.

What about evaluation of individual board members or of a specific board meeting? There are times when the board may want to evaluate the performance of individual members (Bippus, 1985). Even though it functions as a corporate unit, the board is composed of several individuals who must work in harmony if the board is to operate effectively. Every board member needs periodic feedback about how he or she is meeting their individual responsibilities to the board as a whole. Moreover, growth as a board member can only take place after an honest review of strengths and weaknesses. Since the evalaution of an individual board member is intended for purposes of growth, it should include both self-appraisal as well as the perceptions of others. Comments should be descriptive rather than judgmental. The evaluation of individual board members must always be anonymous and considered advisory. In circumstances where an evaluation form is filled out on each individual board member, it may be best if some one other than another member of the board or the superintendent compile and edit the information gathered. Suggested criteria for evaluating an individual board member includes:

•The successful board member understands the proper role of the school board member and acts accordingly.

•The successful board member demonstrates good com-

munication skills and makes sound, well-informed decisions.

•The successful board member functions as a team member

•The successful board member keeps informed and undertakes self-improvement.

•The successful board member maintains open and constructive relationships with others.

Specific board meetings can also be evaluated. Evaluation of a board meeting can be done very informally immediately after the conclusion of the meeting by asking "How did things go tonight?" There are also more formalized methods of evaluating a board meeting (Bippus, 1985). Evaluating a specific board meeting will assist the board to improve its meeting management skills by being aware of such things as starting the meeting on time, sticking to the agenda, individual board member preparation for the meeting, the atmosphere of the board meeting, etc.

Conclusion. School board self-evaluation is an important tool in the effort to improve America's schools. Self-evaluation benefits both the school board and the school district through improved school board and administrative performance, better goal setting, enhanced board credibility with employees and the public, more open relations between the board and the Superintendent, a broader understanding of the school district's operations, and access by the board to better quality information. The board itself, or the board together with the Superintendent, can develop the goals and the criteria for self-evaluation, choose an appropriate evaluative instrument and carry through with the self-evaluation cycle. School board self-evaluation will require honesty, persistence and effort, but it is absolutely essential to an effectively functioning school district.

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